

How We Became an American Family

a memoir

M E Y E R L E V I N

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Our Dear Sister Celia

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How well do I remember her? My earliest recollection is when I must have been three years old. We lived in a small village in the Ukraine. In Yiddish, it was known as a *dorf*. All the villagers were farmers. There were no more than five Jewish families in all. We lived with our grandfather, Favel, and grandma, Pessie. The year was 1914.

Across the road from our house and Grandpa's general store, they built the first brick building in that village. It was a schoolhouse. Celia went to that school. Because it was so close, she wouldn't get up when she was called. Celia also argued that she had plenty of time. She was a procrastinator. All of a sudden, she couldn't go because now it was too late. These were the mornings that I remember. I was four, and she was eight.

I remember that the school showed a movie—probably the first in that town's history. Our mom insisted that Celia should take me. I know that my sister did not want me along. The movie must have been the biblical story of Cain and Abel. When Cain struck Abel, he fell to the ground. I was terrified and bolted out of the theater. Celia chased

after me. Of course, she missed the movie, and I'm sure she never forgave me. As a result, she used to beat me up whenever Mom was not looking. She pounded me on my back like it was a drum. This went on until I was older and used to pay her back.

We moved to a larger town where our mother became the breadwinner. She ran a small business in the marketplace. At that time, I was about seven, and Celia was eleven. During the Russian Revolution, Cossack armies would first shell the town with artillery and then arrive with their swords drawn, riding tall on their horses and beating people on the head, cutting, killing, and, of course, shooting us at the same time. On market days, when it was busy, this would create a panic, as you may imagine. People dropped everything and ran for their lives.

On one such day, when they came riding in, Mom told Celia to grab the basket that contained the money (this was our cash register) and run home. When we finally got home, Mom asked Celia where the money was. Celia was so panic-stricken that she had thrown it away while she ran.

So far, everything I write about my sister puts her in a bad light. These are the ridiculous observations of a small boy. All about the kind and gentle Celia will come to the surface as I get older. In a thousand ways, she proved to be the best friend I ever had. Celia worried about me. She had my best interests at heart as I recall our life together.

We finally came to America and to our dear father whom we hadn't seen in ten years. The escape and struggle to get out of Russia is an epic story unto itself. Our father brought us to Allentown, Pennsylvania, his home. Celia was now 15 and getting prettier every day. I was proud of her. The girls in the neighborhood taught her all the games, songs, and dances of the time. My father loved her so very much, but our mom realized something else. She knew and felt no matter how long we lived there, we would bear the stigma of being the "green-horns"—the immigrants. She worried about Celia's chances of getting a proper husband. She persuaded our father to move to a large city like Philadelphia, which we did. He saw her wisdom, and he loved her too much to deny her wishes. In 1923, Celia enrolled in Thomas Junior

High at 9th and Johnson Streets. She was a very good and serious student. Her teachers liked and respected her for how quickly she learned her lessons and her politeness.

She soon found the company of young people like herself, who were also newcomers to this wonderful America. She danced the Charleston with the best of them. The inevitable happened. She fell in love with Herman, a distant cousin, but Herman was in love with another girl. In that crowd was a boy named Joseph Litvin, who was in love with Betty Marx. Celia told Joe about her heartbreak, and he told Celia about his disappointed love for Betty. They cried on each other's shoulders. They couldn't wait to see each other to share their grief. You guessed it... they fell in love. The whole family fell in love with Joe Litvin. Let me tell you it was the biggest wedding of that time. Mom and Pop invited 300 guests. Pop was not a rich man, but he bought Mom and Celia fur coats. He gave Joe and Celia a \$1,000 wedding gift. All in all, he spent half of what he had in the bank. This was in the year of January 1929.

Joe opened a store on Kensington Avenue. Celia worked alongside him day and night. In fact, she did this for the rest of her life. It was a perfect marriage. Jerry was born nine months later, in October 1929. Jerry was a delight. He was the best thing to have happened in our family.

In many ways, Celia was just like Mom. Both attracted friends who came to them for advice with their troubles and their secrets. They were perceived as wise women, and their friends valued their counsel. Joe and Celia both had this gift. They had a large following of good friends. They were loved and never had an enemy in the world. Wherever



Meyer's sister, Celia, and her husband, Joseph Litvin, at their wedding, 1929

Joe opened a store, the neighbors and customers loved the two of them and trusted them. His Italian customers called him “Giuseppe Giusto” (“Joe the honest one”).

When our dear mom died, Sylvia, my wife, all of nineteen years old, undertook the job of keeping the family together. That included our Pop, Philip, age ten, and Mark, age eight. Celia saw how burdened my Sylvia was and declared that it was her job and responsibility, not Sylvia’s. She took them into her home, and Joe was in full agreement. She became a mother, not a sister to Phil and Mark. This was at a time when the Litvin children—Jerry, Morty, and Elaine—were quite young. Celia knew that it was her duty and hers alone.

Now she turned her attention to me. She couldn’t stand me being in a “dead-end” occupation like the fruit business. First, Celia and Pop financed Sylvia and me to buy a home. Then she urged me to turn my fruit customers into installment-paying customers buying their furniture, clothing, and household things from me. I knew that it was impossible, for I had no money. Oh, I gave her a hard time, but she was persistent and kept steering me in that direction. She found wholesale dealers who would extend credit to me. In the end, she won and probably saved my life. If not for her, I would have died sooner and poverty-stricken. This is what she did for me, and this is how she worried and strived for her two little brothers, Phil and Mark.

When she passed away, all who knew her and loved her were saddened forever. She and Joe were perfect people. They earned love and respect in their “walk through life.”

That was my tribute to a woman without a fault—a magnificent person. I should know I am her brother, Meyer.